

# Opportunities to Use Your Practice's Own "Big Data"

Article by Roxanne Hawn



It's easy to think that only big companies with even bigger budgets, including major veterinary organizations and businesses, can get access to huge and revealing data sets about veterinary patients or veterinary clients. But even typical veterinary practices or small groups of practices also generate data that's useful for making important business strategy and marketing decisions.

If you feel like your most recent client or patient data windows produce data sets that are too small, then take a retrospective view and pull more information from a wider timespan—one year, three years, five years, etc.

## Quality still important

For all the hype about the size of big data sets, quality still matters. That's why it is key that everyone inputting information into your practice management software and electronic medical records uses the tools to their full extent. Letting a little mistake here or a little omission there pollutes not only the accuracy of that patient's file or that client's account, but it can throw off aggregated reports.

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Ari Zabell, DVM, DABVP, who works for Banfield Pet Hospital, which evaluates and reports data from millions of patients, explains, "As a private practice, there are still tremendously useful insights that can be gleaned from your database. At both the small-data level and the big-data level, accuracy of data is more important than volume of data. As such, it is critical that every veterinary team member enters accurate, useful information from the very beginning—otherwise, garbage in equals garbage out."

### Quantify areas of attention

What kind of data can you mine from your records and use in making practice-wide decisions about products, services, protocols, hours, marketing and more?

Zabell explains, "There are many pieces of information a practice can pull out of its management software, glean insights from and find tremendously valuable. For example, identifying which of your patients are geriatric, so you can send their owners information on how to better take care of their aging pets; or knowing what percentage of your clients get health certificates, so you can help educate them on travel tips and out-of-town preventive care options; or even knowing what percentage of your patients get their teeth cleaned annually, so you can estimate the return on investment of additional equipment or marketing efforts."

Use Zabell's ideas as a springboard for team brainstorming for what questions you'd like your practice data to answer. Really, you can look for answers to any questions that begin with "I wonder ..."

- What our baseline performance per day, per week, per month, etc. is
- Which services are most profitable and which kinds of patients benefit from those services
- Which patients are overdue for (insert service or treatment) and what do they have in common
- How do cat-only, dog-only, and mixed households differ in terms of any key metric (main compliance issues, number of practice visits, level and markers of practice loyalty)
- Which multi-pet clients bring more than one pet to each visit and which ones prefer to bring one pet at a time
- Which clients are willing to see different veterinarians and which ones are strictly loyal to one provider
- What services fall below profession-wide norms of usage
- Which days of the week or months of the year require more staffing or other planning
- What are the most common client break-up points and what is it about those spots in the long-term timeline or clinical scenarios where the practice-client relationship may break down

### Get expert help

Just like big data can help researchers narrow down areas for additional investigation, you can plan, create, and monitor a regular set of reports that help you spot places that need your attention or that present keen opportunities for practice growth and success. Knowing your own data stories is like a form of preventive medicine for your practice.

Zabell suggests starting with your practice management or electronic medical records software representative. That person can explain what the software's built-in reporting tools can and cannot do for you. And, Zabell says, "If your data doesn't have the flexibility and reporting functionality you'd like, a lot of information can be gleaned online and with the use of basic spreadsheet tools."

In many cases the executive summaries of major veterinary or pet industry market research reports are available for free. Even if you can pull just a few key data points from the summary to use as touchstones for looking at your own data in those areas, it'll give you solid perspectives to see if certain trends apply in your community, or not.

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For example, there appears to be a surge in younger, single men getting pets. Is that true in your practice? If so, will that change how you do certain things?

You likely can find key performance data from the marketing tools you use as well. Check your website traffic demographics through Google Analytics, and you can generate reports on email marketing performance from your email tool, including how many recipients open your email messages, click on any included links, or take the requested action. If you plot those client engagement results throughout the year, you may find seasonal shifts that help you narrow your marketing efforts to the most lucrative times.

You could also look at flagging client files for those who are most active in your social media efforts so that you can target those people with specific marketing or educational campaigns.

If you cross-reference various engagement stats with your other practice data, you might be able to see that highly engaged clients have certain characteristics or behavior patterns in common, which can help you make strategic decisions to better serve top clients.

### More than a feeling

It's good to use data to confirm—or sometimes disprove—assumptions about veterinary clients, how they act, and what they want. In other words, anecdotes and feelings aren't proof, not in science, not in business strategies.

"Data, when entered and used correctly, can help us as veterinary professionals do a better job with many aspects of serving our clients and caring for their pets," Zabell says. "Whether it's understanding the gaps in care that we provide, so we know where to focus our energy to improve health and quality of medicine, or understanding the

potential financial benefit of providing a new service to our clients, data can help us determine the best ways for our practices to invest our time, efforts, client education and capital."

Good use of your own big data can help you uncover places where efficiencies, expenditures and more relationship building are needed. Look at a year's worth of inputs or five years. Be open to what you find and how it might change decisions you make today and next year.



Roxanne Hawn is a professional writer and award-winning blogger based in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. A former writer/editor for the American Animal Hospital Association and the American Humane Association, she has written about veterinary medicine and pet topics for nearly 20 years. Her work has also appeared in The New York Times, Reader's Digest, Natural Home, [Bankrate.com](http://Bankrate.com), WebMD, The Bark, Modern Dog, and many high-profile outlets. Her first book is called *Heart Dog: Surviving the Loss of Your Canine Soul Mate*.